

THE TRANSIENT AND THE TRANSCENDENT: BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

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Tillie is my third dog, and I have grown in my dog-owner-ness by the experience of being in relationship with three very different dogs. Jenny, the first, a stubborn, way-too-smart German Shorthair Pointer, was actually my ex-husband's dog, and somehow I got this wilful beast in the divorce. I was not a dog lover – having been attacked and bitten as a child – and my relationship with Jenny was a complicated one. I worked long hours and she was alone a lot of the time. I don't think she ever got over the fact that she had been abandoned by her 'true' master, and she acted out in destructive ways. Over time we developed a deep love-hate relationship... and eventually, out of frustration, I decided to get a second dog, thinking that this would make Jenny happier and that our lives would improve.

And so Betty came into my life. A friend had rescued Betty on the streets in Hawaii, and had brought her back to Minneapolis to find her a home. From the moment I saw her, I loved her. She was so sick that she was nearly hairless, she had mange and intestinal problems, but I couldn't help myself. And so Betty came home with me...which did absolutely nothing to improve Jenny's temperament. The two of them never got along, and it was a regular occurrence to be at the vet with one of them following a fight. Yet when Jenny had a seizure at age fifteen that made it clear it was time to put her down, Betty and I sincerely grieved together.

Betty was not a smart dog...in fact, she was as dumb as a stump, as they say. She was sweet and lovable, and my soul mate. We had only a few years together. Her time on the streets and a few bouts of lymes disease had compromised her system, and when she went into kidney failure, I experienced a deep loss.

You know that old advice...that when you lose a dog, it's time to get a new puppy, I suppose to distract you from the loss. In this case, it took me months to get a new dog. It wasn't until I was anticipating the next summer season at the cabin and realizing that I didn't want to be there without a dog, that I began to feel the lure of a new companion. Again, this relationship has not been easy; Tillie is anxious and sometimes aggressive, and too smart for her own good, and I often don't have the necessary patience. But we've now been together for eight years, and are joined at both the hip and the heart. I rue the day when her time with me will come to an end.

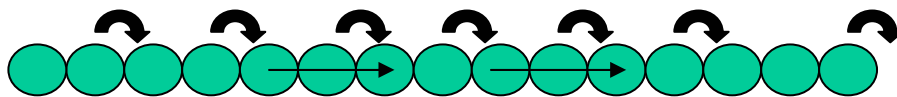
I tell you this bit of dog history because it tells the story of transience in our lives. Nothing lasts forever. People and relationships, and dogs, come and go. It would be possible, I suppose, to become rather calloused to this...and to let it all roll off our backs without getting too attached. We sometimes think that if we can keep ourselves from connecting too deeply, we can keep ourselves from feeling the loss when it comes. Breaking up is hard to do. We like to avoid it when we can.

One of the most acclaimed sermons within historical Unitarianism is a sermon delivered by Theodore Parker in 1841 on the occasion of the ordination of a colleague. Perhaps because of this sermon, Theodore Parker is remembered as one of the three key prophets of religious liberalism, along with William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The sermon was entitled "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity," and in its day, was quite inflammatory, as Parker claimed that the doctrines and rituals of the Christian church were transient, and had little to do with what is permanent or transcendent...that being the word of God spoken through conscience, reason, and faith.

His sermon is a good read, and I'd encourage you to take a look at it some day. I find Parker's argument quite convincing as it applies to what is transient, making a good case that understandings created by humankind are often but crude explanations and are subject to question and change. On the other hand, I find his exposé quite vague when it comes to naming what is permanent. I suppose this is the human condition...we seem to always be in search of the illusive, the unchanging, the eternal. In this immanent existence, we better understand what is transient because it is so ingrained in the nature of life. Even if we do not like it, we understand and accept change as a given. It is much more difficult to name what is permanent, or what some might call, the Truth. Let me come back to that.

It is said that a personal theology isn't worth much if it can't get you through the tough times. This time at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship is a tough time, this time of breaking up. I find myself unable to get very excited about my move to Peterborough because I'm sad to be leaving you and this Fellowship, and because I'm moving further away from family and friends. And so I've found myself exploring the meaning of transience and how my personal theology might be helpful to me.

Looking back at my sermons over these two years, I found it rather alarming that I haven't talked much about my theology, so there's no time like the present! My personal theology is based in process thought, and in order to explore it together, I'd like to give you a brief tutorial. This involves some vocabulary that may be new to you, so please bear with me, and hopefully I'll be able to at least give you a basic understanding. Process thought is based on the metaphysical philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead in which 'reality is not made up of material substances that endure through time, but of serially-ordered events which are experiential in nature.'¹ (Slide 1) Every unit of existence is called an actual entity, which is made up of an ongoing process of events, forever changing and is therefore always 'becoming' rather than 'existing.' An actual entity exists on the atomic level...and the larger things that we see as objects and persons, Whitehead called 'societies of actual entities.' But for our purposes, to make it easier to understand, we can talk about these larger societies as single actual entities.



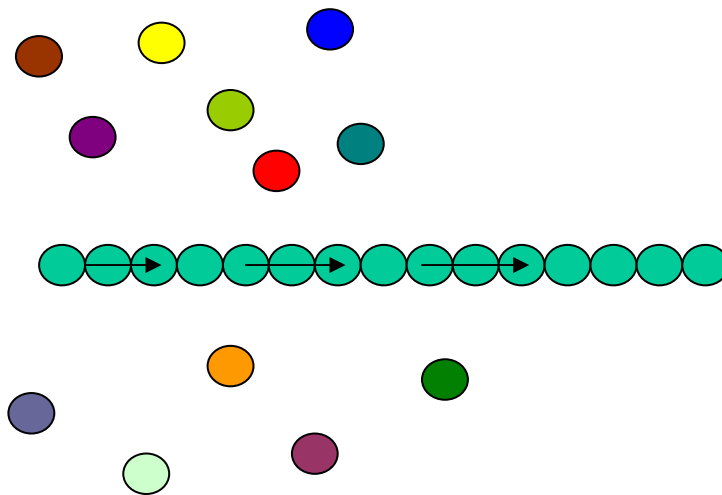
Slide 1

In the case of this figure, an entity is not one moment, not one circle in the succession, but rather is the whole history of individual moments. The key to this is that just as one moment comes into being, it simultaneously passes away, and another moment becomes, only to immediately be gone, etcetera, etcetera. Nothing is ever static long enough to exist unchanged... it is always in a state of 'becoming.'

In each moment of becoming, an entity is influenced by three things. The first, and perhaps the most powerful, is its past. What I am right now is greatly determined by what I was a moment ago. This inheritance of the past is inherent in the serial moments of becoming that make up an actual entity.

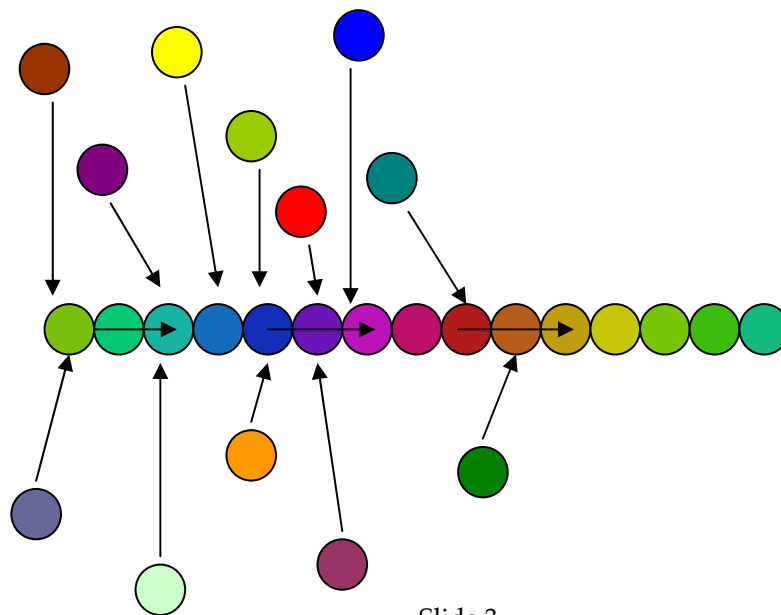
(Slide Two) The second influence is that which surrounds us...we live in community, and every actual entity is constantly interacting with other actual entities. As each moment in each actual entity comes into being, or concretes, it is influenced by all the contemporaries of that passing moment. (Slide 3) That is, everything around us contributes to what we are to

¹ [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/process_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/process_theology)



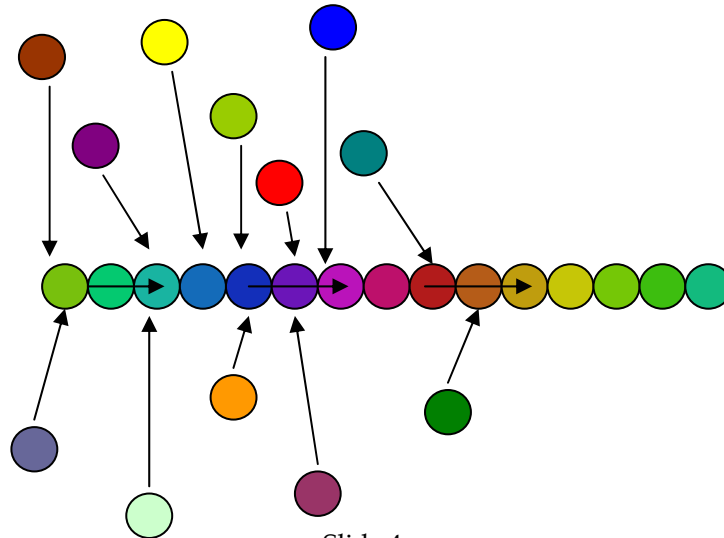
Slide Two

become in the next moment. As the Kunitz poem says, "I have walked through many lives, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides." That which we 'positively prehend' or actively take into our becoming, colors what we will be in the next moment. This is not so drastic as the colors in this slide would indicate...change is generally more gradual than this...but these colors do illustrate the fact that we are influenced by outside forces and beings. So far, I hope, this is generally comprehensible to you... that we are influenced by both our past and by that with which we come into contact. Sometimes we're aware of it and sometimes we're not; but to some degree, our level of awareness affects the intensity and persuasiveness of these influences on our becoming.

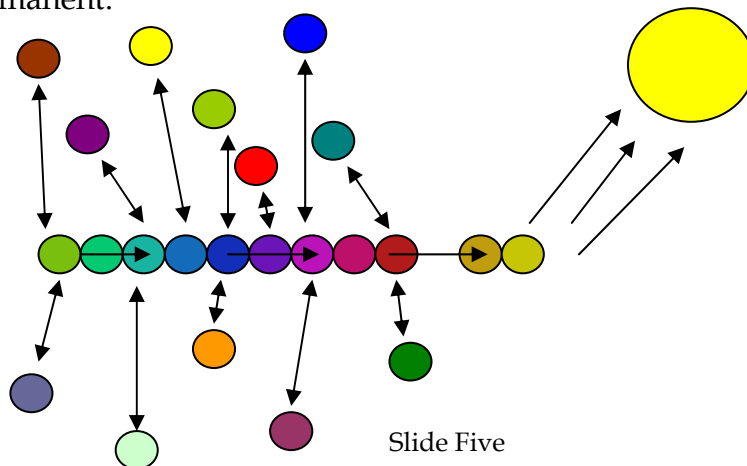


Slide 3

One thing I love about process thought is the way that it addresses our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all of existence. So it is important, I think, to note that in process thought, just as other actual entities are influencing our becoming, we are also influencing the becoming of others. (Slide 4) It is this give and take, this touching and receiving, that resonates with me and so directly addresses the incredible importance of paying attention to our interconnected web. It matters what we do. It matters who we come into contact with, and it matters how we interact with all things and beings.



The third factor in an actual entity's becoming is what Whitehead called the "lure of God." (Slide Five) For Whitehead, God is alternatively described as 'creativity' or 'beauty' or 'harmony.' He believed that we are all given a sort of vision or longing for this beauty/creativity/harmony, and that this vision is what lures us forward in process. My seminary professor described Whitehead's view of God as an 'ongoingness.' Maybe we could also then liken this to Parker's idea of permanence. God is, at least in part, that which remains unchanged and permanent.



This is, not surprisingly, the place where many theologians have connected with process thought in order to understand the transcendent. One pre-eminent theologian in this area was Charles Hartshorne, who was a student of Whitehead, and a Unitarian, working at the University of Chicago. In his book, *The Divine Relativity*, Hartshorne makes a case for a conception of the divine which is both absolute (or permanent) and relational (or transient and in flux.) He believed that God has to be both absolute and reliable AND relative and affected by process. In his view, God is both creator and created. I'm not convinced about all of Hartshorne's conclusions, but I greatly admire his attempt to understand the reality that Parker spoke of in his infamous address. We live in transience and are compelled by what we believe to be permanent. We cannot really know permanence; it is a transcendent concept...something that we cannot really ever fully understand.

So how does process thought and theology help me? I think I've told you before that Forrest Church talks about religion as a response to the dual realities of being born and having to die.² Religion or theology, then, should be helpful in making sense of what comes in between birth and death. In this particular case, how are we to make sense of the fact that we (you and I) came into relationship, in a way that Del has called serendipitous, and that now our life together is coming to an end?

Well, for one thing, in process theology, loss is a given. Loss is required in every moment of becoming, because that moment of becoming means that the last moment perishes. In order for the new to come into being, the old must pass away. Since loss is a given in this theology, it can be honoured and taken seriously. It is my fervent hope that we will all take this loss seriously; by taking the time to care for one another through the transition, by acknowledging our fears and anxieties about the coming changes, and by responding to those fears with love and understanding.

For another thing, process theology reminds me that it matters what I take with me, and that it matters what I leave with you. I chose the photo that's on the front of your order of service because it shows that just as we each ride through each other's lives as on a motorcycle, what matters is that we stop and pitch hay with one another for a while. There is much more to be gained by stopping and working together than there is in just driving by and waving. Each learning and experience here at LUF I have 'positively prehended' into my being, and it has

² A Chosen Faith, 5.

changed me, moved me toward God as it were. I hope that this is also true for you. This calls us to honour all that we have received in relationship, knowing that we have made a difference in each other's becoming.

Process theology also requires us to pay attention to 'how' we become. As I said earlier, our level of awareness affects the process. Whitehead believed that *how* an entity becomes is a determinate in what that entity is. To positivelyprehend something requires both attention and cherishing. To take something in with love and a creative spirit will have a different outcome than to take in that same influence with anger or resentment or fear.

Lastly, process theology is at its very core relational. It acknowledges that community exists at every level – and that in our becoming and perishing we create societies and communities. It is all about the relationships. When one relationship is over, when one becoming passes away, it is available for other events and relationships. In other words, what we have learned together not only affects us as individuals, it affects every future relationship and all the becomings that are affected by those relationships.

My ministry will always contain my relationships with you. This fellowship will always contain some memory of my presence here. And this is not limited to you as a congregation and me as a minister. This is true of every relationship that occurs here (and everywhere.) What you are today is based on all the relationships of the past – not just who those relationships were with, but also by the quality of those relationships and by how you choose to integrate those interactions into who you are.

The transient and the transcendent...both are addressed in process thought. Transience is embedded in the processes of becoming. The transcendent is that creativity which moves the process along and is always available, and perhaps can be seen as a storehouse of all possibility.

About ten years ago, Vaclav Havel gave a speech called "A Sense of the Transcendent" in which he explored the connection between an awareness of the transcendent and human relationships in a multi-cultural global society. In that speech he said, "Since time immemorial, the key to the existence of the human race, of nature, and of the universe, as well as the key to what is required of human responsibility, has always been found in what transcends humanity,

in what stands above it. Humanity must respect that if the world is to survive.... We should look for what unites us: in an awareness of the transcendent.”³

This is the permanence that Parker spoke of. This is the “lure of god” that Whitehead concluded must exist. Even as we look ahead to a time when we will be apart, we are united in our vision and our dream of the transcendent...that better world, that higher conscience, that world community of peace and harmony, that enduring love. This is how we are to survive and to survive brilliantly...by basking in all that connects us...somos el barco, somos el mar. We sail in one another. That is a given. We break up, yes, but we are also always connected. That is the principle of being that abides.

Process theology is a theology of hope based in awareness and responsibility. Any passing away, any change in what we mistook for permanence, is simply another opportunity to open up to all the possibilities. How we use that opportunity is up to each of us. May we be lured toward ever-increasing beauty and chaos, ever-challenging adventures and relationships, ever-hopeful action and responsibility. May we remember that the same lure, the same sun, shines on us all, wherever we may be. Amen.

³ www.crosscurrents.org/havel.htm